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Dear Tobyn

It is several years now since I accompanied you on a road tour of the Ashington Blyth & Tyne Line, which SENRUG has now been campaigning to re-open for over 17 years. We are pleased to see the project, now known as the Northumberland Line, finally coming to fruition. Whilst sponsored and led by Northumberland County Council, SENRUG would like to thank you for your tacit support and encouragement during our long-running campaign, and for the inclusion of the project in both the previous Metro and Local Rail Futures Strategy, and the Current North East Rail & Metro Strategy Consultation.

The purpose of this letter is to bring to your attention SENRUG's further proposal for a new **Metro** route between Blyth Town Centre and Airport, once the core Northumberland Line opens in late 2023 or early 2024.

Economic Justification

The key economic driver is to serve Blyth Town Centre, population 38,000. The Northumberland Line itself will only serve the outskirts of the town via stations at Newsham and Bebside. Yet the former alignment from Newsham to Blyth Town centre remains intact. However, SENRUG has no appetite for a simple shuttle from Blyth to Newsham and believes the link must continue at least to Northumberland Park to interchange with other Metro and bus routes. Onward extension to the Airport utilises sections of the Metro network operating at less than full capacity, greatly improves access to and from Blyth and its developing offshore industries, opens up a new range of job opportunities at the airport and enables the airport to improve its public transport access to / from South East Northumberland. The route SENRUG proposes consists of the following sections:

Blyth Town Centre to Newsham: New Metro line on the former alignment, either operated by battery with a rapid charger at Blyth, or electrified to Metro standards. The alignment is fully in tact except for a minor incursion at Blyth Sports Centre, where there is room for a short diversionary section. This section includes 2 road crossings: Princess Louise Road where we believe a level crossing to Metro standards would be technically acceptable, and the A193 Cowpen Road where we

suggest a cut and cover underpass. The new station would be between and to the north of Blyth Community Hospital and Morrisons (these 2 buildings marking the west and eastern limits of the much larger former station) on land which is mostly car parks or light single storey business units.

Newsham to Northumberland Park: Metro trains to run on Network Rail tracks under battery power (approx 6.1 miles). We are not suggesting this section be electrified to Metro standards.

Northumberland Park to Airport: Along existing Metro tracks, though requiring the existing service connection through the Metro depot between Four Lane Ends and Regent Centre to be upgraded to passenger standards. These sections of Metro tracks currently only take half the number of trains that run on the core route south of Gosforth, so easily have capacity for the new service.

Why Metro, and not Heavy Rail?

The heavy rail route from Northumberland Park to Newcastle is likely to be a non-starter due to capacity constraints on the single track section between Northumberland Park and Benton Junction, which could not be doubled without land acquisition, and additionally shortage of paths on the East Coast Main Line between Benton Junction and Newcastle. Additionally, the new section of track required between Blyth and Newsham is likely to be considerably cheaper to construct to Metro standards.

Why Airport, not Newcastle Central?

We suspect the core Metro corridor from Gosforth through to Newcastle is likely to be at capacity, whereas the two sections Northumberland Park to Four Lane Ends and Regent Centre to Airport both only take half the number of trains on the core Metro section. Additionally, a Metro link from Blyth and South East Northumberland direct to the airport raises new journey and employment opportunities, whilst access from Blyth to Newcastle would be very easily achieved through interchange at Northumberland Park.

Why not Blyth to Cobalt & Silverlink?

We note and support Metro's aspiration for a new route serving Cobalt and Silverlink using another section of former alignment of the old Ashington Blyth & Tyne network. The problem with trains from Blyth serving this alignment is with the geography at Northumberland Park station, which is to the west of the north-south alignment. This means trains from Blyth proceeding onto Cobalt would be unable to serve Northumberland Park (unless a complex reserving manoeuvre were deployed), and we believe Northumberland Park needs to be the key interchange not just between all the different Metro and Heavy Rail routes, but also with bus services.

What Other Implications Are There?

The new Metro fleet would need to have battery capability to cover the 8.1 miles approximately from Blyth Town Centre to Northumberland Park. Alternatively, if Blyth Town Centre to Newsham North, which would be served by Metro trains only, were electrified to Metro standards, the range for battery operation from Northumberland Park to Newsham reduces to just 6.1 miles.

We have already mentioned the service line link through the Metro depot between Four Lane Ends and Regent Centre would need to be upgraded to passenger train standards. Additionally, we believe it would need to be doubled, and possibly a grade separated junctions added for trains flowing from east to west.

We also believe the single track section of the Network Rail line between Newsham and Northumberland Park would need to be doubled. Indeed SENRUG has consistently called for passive provision to be made for this, noting that other aspirations such as increased freight traffic to the Britishvolt factory at Cambois, creation of a heavy rail diversionary route between Benton Junction and Butterwell Junction, and aspirations for a passenger service between Newcastle, Ashington and Alnmouth also via the Butterwell link will all add to the pressure on this single track section.

New Stations:

Benton East: As part of this proposal, we are also calling for a new Metro / National Rail interchange station at Benton East, where the Metro line crosses the East Coast Main Line. We are not suggesting a physical connection between the 2 systems at this location. However, an interchange station would allow passengers from Cramlington, Morpeth and stations to Berwick to connect onto the Metro for direct services to Airport, without needing to continue on to Newcastle Central with the 45 minute run back out. We feel this proposal has significantly greater potential than the suggestion of a new heavy rail link from Newcastle to Airport, which would only serve passengers from the south yet unlikely to be attractive to passengers from York or beyond, who would have better access to Manchester Airport. Furthermore, a heavy rail link from Newcastle to the airport would utilise precious paths on the East Coast Main Line, which could be better deployed in developing the Newcastle – Berwick all stations local service, another SENRUG proposal which we understand has full support of Northumberland County Council. The heavy rail / Metro interchange station at Benton East could be served by Northern and TPE trains, benefitting passengers from both north and south of Newcastle, as well as Tyne Valley passengers on Carlisle – Morpeth trains.

Seghill: SENRUG's original proposals for the Ashington Blyth & Tyne line included a station at Seghill. This was sadly dropped, mainly due to the negative impact on overall journey to Ashington. However as part of the proposal for the Blyth Town Centre – Airport link, and associated doubling of the track between Newsham and Northumberland Park, we believe the station at Seghill should be re-instated, as a minimum for Metro services, with further consideration as to whether Northumberland Line trains should also call here.

Conclusion

In summary, we believe a new Blyth Town Centre – Airport Metro route would be comparatively easy to construct, offer a number of new journey opportunities further enhancing the regeneration of South East Northumberland, and significantly increase access to the airport from a wide number of locations. We will of course be including this proposal as part of our formal response to the current North East Rail and Metro Strategy Consultation; but would also welcome opportunity to present this proposal to you and / or your team, or provide any further comment or clarification that may be required by email.

Kindest Regards

Dennis Fancett

Chair: The South East Northumberland Rail User Group

Winner, Railfuture National Rail Campaigner of the Year Award, 2021

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